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Iraq's Enduring Proliferation Threat

by Peter Sullivan

Conclusions

Despite DESERT STORM and UN weapons and trade sanctions, Iraq remains a serious proliferation and regional security threat.

Baghdad has refused to comply fully with UN resolutions requiring disclosure and elimination of Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) weapons, long range (greater than 150 km) ballistic missiles and related production capabilities. The evidence, including obstruction of UN inspections, indicates that Iraq is concealing and seeking to rebuild prohibited weapons and capabilities. Also, sanctions loopholes enable Iraq to maintain a "dual-purpose" industrial base upon which violations of UN prohibitions can build. If left unchecked, these capabilities can be expected to grow.

Violations of UN Sanctions

UN inspections, and revelations triggered by the defection in summer of 1995 of Iraq's chief of NBC programs, Hussein Kamel, have confirmed what many suspected: Iraq's NBC programs went well beyond what had been assessed prior to DESERT STORM or at the initiation of post-war sanctions, or admitted by Iraq in declarations to the UN. Iraq had a crash program to make its first nuclear warhead for missile delivery by April 1991. Its Biological Weapons (BW) program produced enough anthrax and botulinum toxin to kill the world's entire population. Before DESERT STORM, Iraq filled about 200 missile warheads and aerial bombs with BW agents and deployed them to missile bases and air fields. It had even more capability for Chemical Weapons (CW) employment. Documents obtained by the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) indicate that Iraq contemplated strategic offensive use of CW (and probably BW) through surprise attack.

While Iraq's April 1991 goal for a missile deliverable nuclear warhead was ambitious, some experts believe that at least a basic nuclear bomb was probably within its reach by the end of that year. Fortunately, the invasion of Kuwait and DESERT STORM occurred before Iraq completed such a weapon and Iraq apparently was deterred from using BW and CW by U.S. (and Israeli) warnings which Iraq interpreted as a threat of nuclear retaliation.

Following these new disclosures, Iraq has resumed its familiar stonewalling posture by blocking or curtailing access to suspect facilities, witnesses and documents. For example, while access to a site was delayed in July, Iraqi truck convoys removed purported "concrete pillars" having the dimensions of SCUD missiles. Meanwhile, Iraq continues to claim, without substantiation, that it has destroyed

unaccounted for weapons and related production materials and equipment.

UNSCOM's most recent report cited the foregoing to illustrate Iraq's "organized mechanism of concealment." UNSCOM "continues to believe that limited but highly significant quantities [of prohibited weapons and capabilities] may remain [in Iraq]."

Among other things, Iraq has not accounted for its acknowledged production of 3 metric tons of the advanced and highly toxic VX nerve agent, nor precursor chemicals that could support production of another 400-500 metric tons of VX. Also, UNSCOM assesses that BW agent production "far exceeded" amounts Iraq declared and claims to have destroyed; in this connection, 17 metric tons of media for growing BW agents remain undocumented. Furthermore, the United States estimates that Iraq is hiding up to several dozen SCUD missiles.

In addition, as President William Clinton has stated to Congress, Iraq is committed to rebuilding its prohibited nuclear and other prohibited weapons programs. UNSCOM has reported that Iraq maintains a well funded clandestine operation capable of acquiring "super quality items" such as the advanced Russian missile guidance sets obtained by Baghdad last year.

In Congressional testimony, CIA Director John Deutch stated that Iraq remains a "formidable nuclear proliferation problem," while noting the "chilling reality" that nuclear material and technologies are "more accessible now than at any time in history..."

Iraqi acquisition of bomb grade nuclear material would reduce by several years the time required to make a nuclear weapon. U.S. ability to detect such an acquisition is very limited. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has acknowledged the "low signature associated with the assembly of a nuclear device." IAEA believes that "it is prudent to assume that Iraq retains the theoretical capability to . . . fabricate nuclear weapons and to design and manufacture a missile delivery system" and, despite its denials, complete records of its nuclear program.

Loopholes

Under current sanctions, Iraq is required to declare-and thus to subject to UN monitoring-facilities and other items that can be used for both prohibited and non-prohibited purposes. In addition to providing support and cover for illicit weapons activities, this legal dual-use industrial capacity gives Iraq what an April 1996 DOD report called a "foundation for revitalized efforts once sanctions are lifted and inspections eased or terminated." For example, the DOD report warns that, absent UN inspections, Iraq could "easily renew" BW agent production and "revive a viable . . . [CW] capability in a matter of months."

The prohibition on "long range" ballistic missiles also invites circumvention. Infrastructure supporting legal missiles approaching a range of 150 km (including new Iraqi missiles currently under development) is generally applicable and easily diverted to missiles above that range. Although UNSCOM is monitoring Iraqi cruise missile activities, there is no formal prohibition on non-ballistic missiles of any range, despite their potential for NBC warhead delivery.

Current UN nuclear sanctions prohibit Iraq from engaging in "nuclear activities of any kind," including those for "peaceful" purposes (except use of isotopes for certain civil purposes). Nevertheless, Iraq has been permitted to retain many high-precision machine tools having nuclear weapons applications. Also, 1.8 tons of low enriched uranium (which could be enriched to bomb grade) remains in Iraq in

International IAEA custody in anticipation of "peaceful" use by Iraq after sanctions are lifted.

Whither Sanctions?

Iraq's covert prohibited weapons capabilities, although difficult to quantify, pose a serious threat, especially to U.S. and coalition forces and civilian populations in the Gulf region. If left unchecked, these as well as Iraq's declared dual-use capabilities can be expected to grow.

In addition, the absence or relaxation of UN inspections, the oil embargo and other sanctions would permit Iraq to accelerate its drive to rebuild and exceed its pre-DESERT STORM capabilities. U.S. officials have warned that a Security Council decision to end the oil embargo would yield Iraq \$12 to \$15 billion annually and, thus, remove the incentive Iraq has for even the partial cooperation it now gives to UN inspectors and could lead to their expulsion. The additional funds would also enable Iraq to step up its illicit weapons programs. For the same reasons, the United States has opposed any relaxation of the oil embargo, with the limited exception of the so-called "oil for food plan." This plan would allow controlled oil sales (up to \$1 billion per quarter for a renewable, 180-day period), the revenue from which would be placed in a UN escrow fund to pay for humanitarian relief, as well as war claims and UNSCOM expenses. Implementation of this plan-until recently on hold because of unsettled conditions in northern Iraq and unresolved issues concerning UN monitors-would not alter the basic current sanctions framework, although it might free up some Iraqi resources for military programs.

Furthermore, under the framework of the UN resolutions, a decision to lift the oil embargo completely would pave the way for Council decisions to activate relaxed special weapons sanctions and monitoring procedures, which were previously developed by UNSCOM and IAEA and approved by the Council. These relaxed controls are fraught with more loopholes than current weapons sanctions and would gut any utility remaining in inspections, except as political window dressing. One provision contemplates Iraq's return to "peaceful" nuclear programs with foreign technology assistance such as power reactors. Other provisions would make Iraq's ostensibly civilian chemical and bio-technology industries eligible for imports of foreign dual-use technology. Moreover, relaxed reporting requirements for most exports of dual-use technology relevant to NBC weapons would require only for notifying UN bodies, in contrast to the requirement under current sanctions for prior UN approval. Ending or relaxing trade and other sanctions would also engender pressure to modify the ban on transfers to Iraq of conventional arms and related dual-use technology.

The United States has strongly opposed any consideration of lifting of the oil embargo or other relaxation of sanctions (except as noted above) until Iraq has fully complied with all weapons and other unfulfilled obligations under UN resolutions (e.g., accounting for missing Kuwaiti nationals, returning stolen Kuwait property, ending support for terrorism and repression of its own citizens). Prior to the dramatic revelations last year, U.S. officials were fending off efforts by France and Russia to lift the oil embargo based on Iraq's "progress" in complying with NBC/missile sanctions. A majority of the Security Council currently supports the U.S. position. But the majority is soft; only the United Kingdom appears to share the firm U.S. line. Russia, France and others are likely awaiting the right opportunity to renew efforts to ease the oil embargo more significantly, arguing again for relatively permissive standards for assessing Iraqi compliance with weapons sanctions or seeking liberalization of the restrictions on the oil for food plan. Meanwhile, Russians, French and others regularly visit Iraq to line up business deals in anticipation of a relaxation of sanctions even as Iraq continues to test UN resolve by obstructing inspections and by taking offensive action against the Kurds.

Recommendations

Strong U.S. actions are required to head off adverse trends and to deal more effectively with Iraqi retention and possible use of prohibited weapons.

Tighten Sanctions. The United States should continue to oppose any general relaxation of the current sanctions framework. With regard to the oil for food plan, the United States should prevent its renewal if Iraq does not strictly comply with UN monitoring and other conditions. Additional actions, however, are required to deal more effectively with Iraq's ongoing violations of UN weapons sanctions. The United States should begin building support to close loopholes in weapons sanctions (e.g., eliminating or capping Iraq's dual-use industrial capacity, restricting cruise missile and conventional force capabilities, barring Iraq's return to "peaceful" nuclear activities, requiring UN approval of any future permitted dual-use imports). While it may be difficult initially to secure favorable Council action (especially if Russia and France threaten a veto), the process (e.g., white papers, high level demarches) would highlight the continuing Iraqi threat and at least bolster support for current sanctions, as well as tougher enforcement. Each new Iraqi provocation-blocking UN inspectors, threatening troop movements, or some other violation of UN obligations-could well provide the occasion for Council action to tighten weapons sanctions. However, tightened sanctions would provide cold comfort as long as Iraq refuses to comply.

Toughen Enforcement. When Iraqi troop movements and other military activities threatened Kuwait in October 1994 and again in 1995, the United States reinforced its military presence in the Persian Gulf and is continuing to take measures to enhance Gulf security, such as prepositioning equipment. In response to Iraq's recent offensive against the Kurds, the United States launched cruise missiles to disable Iraqi air defense sites. While helpful in addressing problems posed by Iraq's conventional forces, these responses are insufficient to counter Iraq's chronic violations of UN NBC/missile sanctions. Indeed, Iraq has escaped paying any significant additional price for its pattern of contempt of these sanctions. In early 1993, after Iraq had blocked UN inspections, the United States dispatched cruise missiles to destroy a former nuclear fabrication facility near Baghdad where dual-use machinery was located. The United States should affirm that it is prepared to take military action again to redress Iraq's continuing material breaches of UN weapons sanctions. Resolution 678, which authorized DESERT STORM, provides continuing authority for UN members to "use all necessary means" to enforce Iraq's post-War UN obligations. Facilities where UN inspectors have been denied immediate access, as well as dual-use NBC/ missile and general military infrastructure, would make appropriate targets.

Strengthen Defense and Deterrence. The United States should improve its capability to defend against NBC use, in view of the greater risk of such use by an adversary in a regional conflict. High priority should be given to Department of Defense (DOD) actions to rectify deficiencies found by the Government Accounting Office in BW/CW defense preparedness (e.g., shortfalls in equipment, training and medical support) and by the DOD Counterproliferation Review Committee in BW/CW defense doctrine. Also, the United States should accelerate ongoing programs aimed at developing new capabilities over the next several years to counter the NBC threat (e.g., standoff BW/CW detectors, vaccines and antibiotics, effective missile defenses, covert BW/CW delivery response, identification and defeat of buried and mobile targets). In any event, the threat of a nuclear response will remain an essential element of U.S. strategy to deter an adversary's BW/CW use. Deterrence would be strengthened by making this explicit in U.S. declaratory policy. Threats that merely imply a possible nuclear threat may no longer be credible to Iraq (or other proliferators) in light of Gulf War memoirs by Bush Administration officials disclosing that there was no plan for a nuclear response to Iraqi BW/CW use.

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